Content Warning for:

*Gore

*Injury

*Body horror

*Animal experimentation

[*Theme music: "Some Spooky Sh*t Is Going On Here" by Theo Goodwin.*]

INTRO

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The Underwood Collection, Episode 12: Deep Fascia

[*Theme ends*.]

MORGAN

—You're looking for *our* Ulysses?

RENEE

I mean, I doubt there's *that* many people named after Greek heroes working in an archive in downtown DC, so… yes? Short, Black, you know, generally annoyed?

MORGAN

That's the one. Are you here to give a statement?

RENEE

I haven't decided yet, you know? More fun to just… do it in the spur of the moment.

MORGAN

Sure. Ulysses should actually be returning soon, so you can make yourself comfortable in the office.

RENEE

From?

MORGAN

Excuse me?

RENEE

Like, where are they coming back from?

MORGAN

…Vacation. I'll be right back.

RENEE

[*Rattling of a tape recorder.*]

Oh, and do you want me to keep this running?

MORGAN

Keep—Jesus, I'm going to have words with Mars. No, I'll turn this off.

[*Click of a tape recorder.*]

ULYSSES

You know, I wasn't sure it was actually going to be you.

RENEE

Why wouldn't it be?

ULYSSES

Didn't think that my… physical therapist was that invested in the supernatural.

RENEE

[*Laughing*.]

Are you saying that blondes can't like horror?

ULYSSES

[*Warm*.]

Why are you here, Renee? Did Ever put you up to this?

RENEE

Do you really think your husband would send me to bother you at work?

ULYSSES

You and Ever talk about my self-care habits like I'm going to drop dead. So yes.

RENEE

[*Still amused.*]

I see the point. That's not what I'm here for though.

ULYSSES

A statement, then?

RENEE

An offer.

ULYSSES

An *offer?* Is this another 'improvement' you're promising, or—

RENEE

It might make more sense if I, like, *give it* in a statement. Like, how I got here.

ULYSSES

Got here?

RENEE

Oh, it was a *process*.

ULYSSES

Well. It’s my job, so. Whenever you’re ready.

RENEE

You’re taking this a lot better than I thought.

ULYSSES

Say that again when you’re finished.

RENEE

Aw, Ulysses, you’re so sweet. Well, the most obvious beginning is the book. It wasn’t, like, spooky, I don’t think? I’ve heard about those, the Leitners? As far as I know, this was just a normal book.

I was a student, at the time, studying engineering. It was a major I chose because I wanted to design and build things, make things more efficient. I mean, I do that now, just not in the way I was planning.

Anyway, I had back problems. Y'know, carried too much tension and had bad posture or whatever. Sometimes stress would get me so messed up I could barely walk to class. So like any broke college student I went the route of least expense and tried to find out how to make it better myself, and because I like to know my stuff before I try and do something, that meant a fair amount of research.

The book was about the scientific side of massage or something, focused on why and how problems arise or how you can alleviate them. Interesting in general, but the subject that really got my attention was deep fascia.

Everything in your body is connected. Seems obvious, right? But in a sense, your body is just a bunch of connective tissue enveloping some pockets of flesh. It surrounds every muscle and fascial compartment, forms the ligaments and the tendons and anchors them to bone. Joint capsules, blood

vessels, cartilage, bone, pretty much anything in your body is enveloped and connected with deep fascia or is a part of the deep fascia itself. If you can manipulate just this one organ system, you can manipulate almost every physical structure in the body, and certainly how they interact with each other.

There's a lot of important sensory organs associated with deep fascia too—Nocioceptors and proprioceptors, that kind of thing. They're important, you know? Tell you where you are in space or where you hurt. Just as easy to affect as the rest of it really, but it's somehow not quite as much fun to make someone feel like there's a permanent gash in them or none of their limbs are where they actually are. Not quite *my* brand of terror. I find the connections much more interesting.

It's almost poetic—How this one organ encompasses your entire body, how so much of you is a part of those connections. You couldn't function without it. Your body couldn't even exist without it, you'd just slip apart. Trust me, I know from experience.

I got really interested, after learning about that. Muscles are continuous with tendons, are continuous with bone? From an engineering perspective, I was absolutely fascinated. I learned more about gross anatomy after that too, how the human body fits together and functions.

It's not actually that well designed. I mean, I said I had back problems, but the truth is, everyone does. Mutations are one-in-a-million and 99.9% of those mutations either have no effect or they have a detrimental effect. And then the advantageous mutation normally isn't as dramatic as people think; adaptive traits have to accumulate over millions of years. Like vertical posture. The human spine evolved from a series of coincidences to allow us to use our hands and walk upright, without any attention to what's comfortable for us. One of evolution's shortcomings, y'know. It filters out issues that kill you early but not those that leave you aching and miserable.

Same goes for things like arms—They're excellent, sure, compared to nothing, and humans do have a good range of motion and more throwing strength or aim than any other animal. But if you look at how a lever works, you'll see that they could be improved. Just another centimeter here or there, give just a touch more torque, and you'd be so much stronger.

So I was curious.

I was already good at physics, and figuring out how things work. Engineering track, yeah? It was easy to switch into biomechanics from there.

It was so frustrating, to sit there and learn about how all these systems work, to listen to my classmates wax poetic about the *beauty* of anatomy and the *ingenuity* of biological systems. All I could see were those glaring flaws, and how simple it would be to improve them.

It is a simple fix, structurally. Took me a lot more work to figure out how to actually do it.

We did a lab with axolotl embryos. Got to slice them up and put them back together to see how they'd grow. Most people didn't put too much work into *improving* the design, only changing it in a way that might not kill the poor things. I wasn't so careless. I spent *hours* figuring out exactly where and what to change to make the salamander better, a perfected version of itself.

It didn’t work the first time, of course, but I managed to convince the professor to let me attempt the lab again and again until I succeeded.

The mice were next—Yes, yes, a supernatural nightmare following proper research procedure, I’m a bit of a nerd—And those were a little trickier to manipulate. The powers don’t seem to care much about science or physics though, because I managed to do it, eventually. I reworked its delicate little parts into a more streamlined design, something faster and stronger and better than what it was before.

I didn’t jump straight to humans, after that, although I could have. The process—Scientific process, that is—Is important, so I worked my way up.

When I did start, though, I found that humans are just as easy to change and manipulate as anything else. Just some tugging and twisting, a few relocated connections here and there, and you have something subtly different but so much *better*.

My first human project—Other than myself, but I'm not sure you could count me as human, even then—Was my sibling. Micha's a few years younger than me, and I love them dearly. So when they started getting the same chronic back pain I had, it was difficult to keep from doing all I could right away. They did say they wanted to try and deal with it themselves though, so I left them alone.

After a few months though, they did come to me. I didn't tell them how I'd done it, right away, but the feeling of fixing that spine, of removing the problem in a way no chiropractor or even surgery could? It was incredible.

Micha said it had hurt them, which is understandable, given that I was entirely restructuring their back. They were achy and sore for a few days afterwards, but it healed fast, much faster than it should have, for what would technically be classified as a connective tissue injury.

They were so thrilled, when their back pain wouldn't return. There were a few years where we were happy, got dinner on a regular basis and spent hours on the phone. My skill went ignored, and our relationship stayed good.

Micha's a dancer, though. Not professionally, but as a hobby. Even hobbyist dancers often get sports injuries, and they were no exception.

It was a twisted knee, so not really a huge deal in the end, but it got me thinking about how I could have prevented it. I went a little overboard honestly, researching how to improve joints. I spent days locked up, drawing out schematics of my improved versions.

I convinced Micha to let me try to do something to prevent further injuries eventually. I didn't say what precisely I was going to do, but they agreed, which is, uh—Which is the important part. So I changed them, made them that much stronger and faster, more flexible but with more stable joints until it'd take active effort for anything to go wrong.

When they looked at themselves afterwards they didn't even try to see how my enhancements helped. Their appearance hadn't changed much, but they still stared at the mirror like it was a stranger who was looking back.

We don’t, uh—We don’t talk much anymore. But I know they’re safe and happy and they’re not gonna get any more reckless sports injuries, and that’s gonna have to be enough.

[*Awkward cough*.]

Enough about my family, though, Uly, this is supposed to be official!

Fixing people, with or without their permission, became a hobby, and then a job, and now it’s just sort of what I *do.* I take the human form, clever enough but ripe with systems to make more efficient, and I rework it into something better, in any sense. Faster, stronger, less prone to injury. Sometimes I do the opposite, wreck systems or change them just enough to make someone’s life miserable. But mostly, I make people *more* than just that.

I know there’s others like me. Someone named Hopworth, I think, in England? I’ve heard about what *he* does. Sort of bitter about it, honestly, because I could make so many great designs with that power. He just steals bones and slams a bunch of limbs together, and where’s the creativity in that? Boring.

I can’t do as much. Just reach in and *rework* a few connections, maybe make some minor alterations in structure. Still like to think I’m better at improving things than *he* is.

After all, I don’t have a bad back anymore. I’ve improved it, and the rest of myself besides.

And, like I keep saying, I could improve you too, if you asked.

ULYSSES

I—I didn’t think that you meant—

RENEE

[*Cheeky*.]

Most people don’t. Honestly, not sure how much there is to say. My statement ends there, I guess.

ULYSSES

[*Beat*.]

Wow.

RENEE

You good there?

ULYSSES

You've literally been serving the Flesh for the entire time I've been seeing you, and I just had no idea.

RENEE

I'm like, *really* good at not being creepy about it.

ULYSSES

The answer's no, by the way.

RENEE

Hm?

ULYSSES

To the offer. I'll stay how I am.

RENEE

But it *hurts* you. I can see how much pain you're in.

ULYSSES

And I don't want to put any more Fear in these old bones, alright?

RENEE

...Yeah. Yeah, of course.

ULYSSES

Thank you.

RENEE

You still have an appointment next Thursday! Mundane methods only, I promise.

ULYSSES

[*Warm*.]

Get out of here, Renee.

RENEE

Anything for you, Uly.

ULYSSES

I'll walk you out. Ah—And end recording.

[*Tape recorder clicks off*.]

[*Theme plays*.]

OUTRO

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